PART ONE

THE GEOPOLITICS OF MASTERY

At the close of the revolutionary war, the political relations of the independent colonies were much perplexed. Having not yet arrived at a conviction of their common interest nor being freed from the influence of their common position, they found themselves, to use a fanciful illustration, like the immense masses of ice that sometimes congregate in northern seas, floating in such immediate contact that they must close into one compact body or be tossed by the restless motions of the waters in rude and ruinous collision. But in the nature of things it was impossible that a nation could be made in one generation.

Before the action of national sympathy had given to our union the sacredness of national existence, at the very moment we assumed the responsibility of independence, there came the necessity for a national government. And here is the great anomaly in the political history of the country – the existence of a national government before we were a nation.

William Henry Trescot, *Oration Delivered Before the Washington Light Infantry*, 1847

We became a nation by the Constitution; whatever is national springs from the Constitution; and national and constitutional are convertible terms.

Jefferson Davis, "Speech at Faneuil Hall, Boston," October 11, 1858

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Slaveholders' Stake in American Empire

Southern masters would not have worked so hard to shape American
nationhood had they not done so well within a growing federal Union.
The economic prosperity enjoyed by American slaveholders in 1860 set
them apart from their counterparts in the rest of the hemisphere, as did
the enormous authority they wielded within the U.S. government. Most
proslavery Southerners appreciated how the Union's combination of
security and opportunity had created a slave system that the Charleston
editor Richard Yeadon described in 1857 as "imperial in extent." Despite
slaveholders' growing disagreement about their collective future, few could
effectively rebut Yeadon's claim that the Union had proved "the great
bulwark of the institution of Southern slavery" and that the federal govern-
ment had "nursed and fostered" the institution from "a feeble and rickety
infancy, into a giant manhood and maturity and a self-sustaining power."[1]

A few figures and some basic geography dramatize slavery's growth within
the United States between American independence and the Civil War. In
1770, fewer than half a million slaves – or one out of every five enslaved
workers in the New World – lived in those mainland colonies that would win
their independence from Great Britain. American slaves were concentrated
along the Atlantic coast, at the fringes of a plantation complex centered in
Caribbean sugar islands that were the oldest and most dynamic parts of the
Atlantic economy. By the time of the secession crisis of 1860–61, the number

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[1] Richard Yeadon, Jr., "Slavery and Its Federal Relations – The Influence of the Union on the
Institution of Slavery," Charleston *Courier*, February 8, 1858; see also Benjamin F. Perry,
*Speech of Benjamin F. Perry of Greenville District Delivered in the House of Representa-
tives of South Carolina* (Charleston: J.B. Nixon, 1851), 8–10.

of slaves within the United States had increased by nearly 1,000 percent to more than 4 million. This represented fully two-thirds of all bound laborers across the Western Hemisphere. Emancipations in the Caribbean and in South America reshaped the geography of New World slavery, as did that global demand for short-staple cotton grown most profitably on mainland plantations. By the 1830s, slavery's center of gravity had shifted to the Mississippi River Valley, where masters concentrated slaves in what became the wealthiest counties in the entire United States. This area's cotton boom revitalized slavery in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia; helped ensure that bondage would flourish in the postrevolutionary Gulf coast states of Florida and Alabama; and soon spilled over into the frontier societies of Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana's Red River watershed. By the 1850s, ambitious planters were looking toward Texas and beyond, imagining the sweep of an even more spectacular Cotton Kingdom.[2]

Economic forces – especially the global demand for short-staple cotton – worked in tandem with a federal state that equipped slaveholders to exploit virgin land and to continue what seemed to be a never-ending series of profit-maximizing migrations. Southern representatives secured their interests by backing a newly powerful government late in the 1780s, thus achieving a more stable Union by 1790, just as viability in the international realm became the most important factor in the preservation of chattel bondage. Over the following tumultuous decade, the military and diplomatic apparatus of nationhood insulated U.S. plantations from the radicalized Caribbean rocked by black revolution. Having secured the mainland from the threat of "contagion," this same government ensured internal order by relocating native inhabitants from the interior South, which in turn cleared the way for an expansionist war during the 1840s. The constitutional structure of Americans' "compound republic" unleashed these full federal powers in "external" affairs while it checked most federal involvement in "internal" matters of slavery and racial hierarchy, where the jurisdiction of the separate states would be supreme.

Despite the suspicions of later critics, no coordinated "slave power conspiracy" designed this imperial republic to project bondage across North America. Those who established the basis of the Cotton Kingdom in the early decades of American nationhood were neither as grasping nor as confident as those who, during the 1850s, sought to extend their sway to the Pacific coast,

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[2] Figures are from Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (London: Verso, 1988), 5, 544. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: A History of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

across the Caribbean, and perhaps even to Brazil's Amazon Valley. Prior to
1820, slaveholding men and women could scarcely have imagined a future
defined by the wealth and power accumulated by their children and grand-
children. Still suffering from British military disruption of coastal plantations,
masters in the early American republic tended to be more anxious than ambi-
tious and were less intent on gaining an empire than on preventing catastro-
phe. Their preference for stronger federal government in the late 1780s
stemmed from their perceived vulnerability. As the South Carolina Congress-
man William Smith put it, "when we entered this confederacy we did so from
political, not moral motives," and chief among these was a desire to make
American nationhood a mechanism of self-preservation.[3]

Slaveholders' effective use of federal power both secured their mastery
and established their credentials as guardians of the national interest.
Accomplishments that stabilized plantations simultaneously bolstered the
pride of white Americans across the Union. The distinctive quality of this
first stage of proslavery imperialism was its ability to entwine the interests
of masters and the rest of white America and to make national heroes out of
leaders like Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. Masters' association
of their own interests with larger national purposes continued through the
1850s, even if these began to seem hollow to many erstwhile northern allies.
In moments of candor and at times of crisis, slaveholders tended to admit
that their American patriotism had always been backed up by an element of
calculation. Late in 1861, the crusty James Chesnut, Sr., summed up a
perspective he had developed over a long life, which made him skeptical
of those intent on making war against the Union. "Without the aid and
countenance of the whole United States, we could not have kept slavery,"
he insisted, adding, with some sense of vindication, that he "always knew
that the world was against us." There was nothing mysterious or sentimen-
tal about Chesnut having been a "Union man." He simply "wanted all the
power the United States gave me – to hold my own."[4]

FEDERAL UNION AND JEFFERSONIAN EMPIRE

In his public campaign for the new federal Constitution, James Madison
argued, "if we are to be one nation in any respect, it clearly ought to be in
respect to other nations." By framing American nationhood in avowedly

[3] William L. Smith in *DHFFC*, 10: 310.
[4] Chesnut quoted in C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1991), 241.

international terms, Madison drew attention to the primary challenges that
Americans faced in 1788 and accurately foresaw the Union's chief preoccupa-
tion for the thirty years that followed. Unifying control of the interior and
asserting a presence along the Atlantic coast were the main achievements of
these years, though close behind was the quite unexpected extension of the
national domain across the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. Fears
rather than hopes prevailed for these Jeffersonian architects of American
empire, who worried about how the Union might become a European
client state or fall victim to intrigues between Native peoples, slaves, and
hostile imperial powers. Such scenarios would be all the more likely if
the North American Union splintered into several partial confederacies or,
worse still, if dozens of separate republics reintroduced the uncertainties of
the European state system to North America. The "peace pact" adopted by
1790 thus helped not only to preserve a Union but also to create a federal
state capable of setting American boundaries, policing who might and might
not cross these frontiers, and accommodating competing sectional interests
during a necessarily destabilizing process of territorial growth.[5]

Madison's fellow slaveholders had a particular interest in supporting an
American nation that could be a viable presence "in respect to other
nations." The occupying armies of the Revolutionary War liberated tens
of thousands of slaves and thus suggested how another incursion might end
the institution altogether.[6] Most realized how the vulnerabilities of planta-
tion zones precluded an exclusively "Southern" Union. Charles Pinckney
was prescient in warning his state's ratifying convention that "without
Union with the other states, South Carolina must soon fall." He added that
only a "Quixote" would assume that a state with such a dense slave pop-
ulation "could long maintain her independence if she stood alone, or was
only connected with the southern states." Edmund Randolph similarly

[5] Madison "Federalist No. 42" in Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist* (Middletown, CT:
  Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 279; David C. Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World
  of the American Founding* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Francois Fursten-
  berg, "The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History," *AHR* 113
  (June 2008).
[6] For Madison's worries about slaveholders' vulnerability see Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire
  of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
  University Press, 1995), 179–80, 259–61, 300. For the broader context, see Sylvia R. Frey,
  Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age (Princeton: Princeton Uni-
  versity Press, 1991); John Shy, "British Strategy for Pacifying the Southern Colonies, 1778–
  1781," in *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of
  North Carolina Press, 1978); and Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-
  American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 99–157.

warned his fellow Virginians against allying with only Carolina and Georgia, two states that were "diminished in their real force, by the mixture of an unhappy species of population." A "southern confederacy" would simply not be viable, Randolph continued. "As soon would a navy move from the forest, and an army spring from the earth, as such a confederacy, indebted, impoverished, in its commerce, and destitute of men, could, for some years at least, provide a simple defense for itself."[7]

The federal government that was inaugurated in 1789 quickly proved its ability to shore up this weak southern flank. George Washington's administration signed treaties to open the Georgia backcountry to white settlement and began a process that brought free trade to the Spanish-controlled Mississippi River, which had been the most divisive sectional issue of the 1780s.[8] Then, between 1791 and 1803, the federal government successfully insulated the mainland from a series of crises that rocked the French colony of Saint Domingue, formerly the most stable and prosperous of all New World slave regimes. U.S. policymakers initially formed a unified response to the massive slave rebellion there, as rivals Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton cooperated to provide three-quarters of a million dollars in American aid to the island's planters. Shifting struggles on Saint Domingue and in France soon resulted in a partisan split that divided the American master class against itself. Federalists, who were especially strong in the Carolina Low Country, strove to increase British ties; the Jeffersonian Republicans, whose chief base of support lay in the Chesapeake, actively sympathized with the French Republic, even after the National Assembly issued an emancipation decree in 1794. By the late 1790s, as war raged in both Europe and the Caribbean, the staunchly proslavery Federalists of the Deep South began to consider how accepting the island's black governors might calm and contain the island's revolutionary turmoil. Jefferson

[7] Pinckney in *Debates Which Arose in the House of Representatives of South Carolina* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1831), 28; Randolph in Jonathan Elliot, ed. *The Debates in the Several State Conventions, on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (Washington, 1836), 1: 487. Jeffrey Robert Young, *Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670–1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 91–98.

[8] Arthur Preston Whitaker, *The Spanish American Frontier: 1783–1795: The Westward Movement and the Spanish Retreat in the Mississippi Valley* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1927); D.W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographic Perspective on Five Hundred Years of History, Vol. 2, Continental America, 1800–1867* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 23–41; Drew McCoy, "Madison and American Nationality" in *Beyond Confederation: The Constitution and American National Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). Interest in the Mississippi River in Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia followed from the fact that of the original thirteen states, these were the last to relinquish claims to territory on the eastern shore of the river.

established a countervailing Republican position by warning how rapprochement with a government of former slaves would lead to "black crews, & supercargoes & missionaries" whose "free ingress & intercourse with their black brethren" in the United States would lead to certain disaster.[9]

The Caribbean crisis remained unresolved as the Jeffersonians concluded a successful political campaign for the presidency in 1800. During the fall of that year, a plot by the Richmond slave Gabriel to kidnap Virginia governor James Monroe suggested that slaves were being "taught to regard the French as patrons to their cause." Governor Monroe and President Jefferson responded to this jarring event by coordinating state and federal efforts to deport rebels beyond American borders, a measure that both men hoped might lay the basis for a broader program of relocating all free blacks as far away as possible from the United States. To their alarm, the Jeffersonians discovered not long after taking office that Napoleon Bonaparte hoped to accomplish very near the opposite in his initiative to restore French authority. His plans would purge Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe of its most dangerous black rebels by sending them northward to a proposed French penal colony near New Orleans. While France's strategic interest in the trans-Appalachian region would have created friction under any circumstance, the geopolitics of black revolution and forced relocation injected a new urgency in the Jeffersonian quest for control of the Mississippi Valley. While Jefferson at first asserted his willingness to cooperate with Napoleon to isolate Saint Domingue and "starve" the black leadership there, he changed course once the issue was entangled with white American control over the Mississippi Valley backcountry. If reintroducing slavery to the French colonies might eliminate a powerful example to southern slaves, doing so seemed likely to unleash massive violence, spur furious black resistance, and, worst of all for slaveholders, bring a flow of black Jacobins into Louisiana, a locale dangerously near U.S. territory. President Jefferson and Secretary of State Madison witnessed how volatile slavery's restoration in Guadeloupe could be when the French navy carried a relatively small group of black rebels disturbingly close to the U.S. coastline. The panic that resulted caused Deep South planters to seek federal aid and led the South

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[9] Tim Matthewson, *A Proslavery Foreign Policy: Haitian–American Relations During the Early Republic* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 24–51, 83–4; Jefferson to James Madison, February 12, 1799 in *Papers of James Madison* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia) 17: 230–31; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge,: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

Carolina governor to order the immediate execution of any "french Negro incendiary prisoners" who might be brought ashore.[10]

Bonaparte's proposals, and the accompanying specter of relocating black rebels along the Atlantic and within the Mississippi Valley, were resolved as unexpectedly as this episode had begun. Heavy losses in an attempted military campaign against Saint Domingue caused France to abandon the island and to offer the country's entire interest in the Louisiana territories to the United States. In the long term, this doubling of the national territory would be a critical moment in the formation of the American Cotton Kingdom. Yet its announcement initially caused a great many masters to fear how such a sudden extension of frontiers might embroil the country in international difficulties, give rise to a separate Mississippi Valley Confederacy, and undermine the economic viability of their own plantations (this last concern persisted among those planters who would remain wary of southwestern migration through the 1840s).[11] In 1802, the American diplomat Robert Livingston of New York systematized these geopolitical anxieties when he noted how "the unproductive labor of clearing the immense forests" seemed to be "ill calculated for slaves, since it requires long habit in the use of an ax, and a strength and activity seldom found in slaves." Dim economic prospects seemed hardly worth the risk, he continued, since collaboration between Indians and slaves would follow any introduction of slavery into what was widely considered to be a tropical frontier. "The establishment of new colonies in a marshy country and warm climate" required black as well as white labor, but this necessity held the seeds of its undoing. In all probability, expansion would produce little more than "the inroads of savages, the

[10] Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Madison to Rufus King, September 28, 1801, in *State Papers and Correspondence Bearing on the Purchase of the Territory of Louisiana* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 7; Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 375–402; Matthewson, *A Proslavery Foreign Policy* 106, 109. For the Guadeloupe scare, see Wade Hampton and Fontaine Maury to James Madison, August 21, 1802 in *Papers of James Madison, Secretary of State Series* (Charlottesville, 1993–) 2: 503 and Gov. John Drayton's instructions, quoted in Young, *Domesticating Slavery*, 125. Furstenburg, "The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier," provides an excellent summary of the interconnections between control of the Mississippi Valley and Napoleon's French Caribbean policies.
[11] Robert L. Paquette, "Saint Domingue and the Making of Territorial Louisiana," in David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 204–225; James David Miller, *South by Southwest: Planter Emigration and Identity in the Slave South* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

insurrection of slaves, the insubordination of troops, and the abuses of offi-
cers when far removed from the superintending eye of the Sovereign."[12]

Disaster remained a possibility well after a treaty transferred Louisiana to
the United States; only at the end of the six successive presidential administra-
tions of the Virginia planters Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe would American
control of the Mississippi River Valley be firmly established and the sectional
tensions accompanying this expansion be defused. The job of cultivating the
loyalty of white Louisianans was entrusted to the Virginia native William
Claiborne, who served as territorial governor after James Monroe twice
declined the position. Claiborne's duties included enforcing the ban on slave
imports into Louisiana and helping to suppress the largest attempted slave
revolt in American history, which South Carolina planter Wade Hampton,
one of the country's largest slaveholders, crushed while serving as a U.S. general
in 1811. A foreign invasion of the region remained a threat until the Tennessee
planter Andrew Jackson defeated the British at New Orleans four years later.
Then, in 1821, Monroe brought a perspective honed as Paris negotiator and as
secretary of state to the presidency, where he authorized a treaty with the
considerably weaker power of Spain that brought all of the Florida territories
under U.S. control, thus securing the last in a series of American acquisitions
around the eastern Gulf of Mexico. The leverage of statesmen and military
leaders was greatly enhanced by a major population influx and by the arrival of
masters and slaves who replaced sugar with cotton as the region's most lucra-
tive staple. While the loyalty to the United States of these southwestern planters
owed something to their earlier residence in the Atlantic republic, what mat-
tered most was the American government's ability to secure plantation prop-
erty far more effectively than the weak Spanish, the destabilized French, or the
seemingly untrustworthy British. Options beyond these alternatives were
sparse, since any white settlement on such a dangerous frontier needed the
protection of a more powerful guardian state.[13]

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[12] Robert Livingston memoir presented August 10, 1802 in *State Papers and Correspondence
Bearing on ... Louisiana*, 36–50. Similar concerns had hindered French development of
Louisiana slavery in the early 18th century, as Ira Berlin explains in *Generations of Captivity*,
88–96. For broader American anxieties about the purchase, see Peter Kastor, *The Nation's
Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (Yale University Press, 2004).

[13] Kastor, *The Nation's Crucible*; James E. Lewis, Jr., *The American Union and the Problem
of Neighborhood: The United States and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire, 1783–1829*
(Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr.
Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase* (New York:
Oxford University Press, 2003), 206–7; Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expan-
sionism and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
2005).

Slaveholders valued these early southwestern additions primarily because
of the security they provided. Compared to later periods of territorial expan-
sion, masters in this formative period of American empire were relatively
unconcerned with the need for more plantation land and put little emphasis
on the need for greater representation in the federal government. What mat-
tered was blocking European incursions with the creation of new forts along
American borders and the securing of white domination over potentially dis-
ruptive free people of color on the margins of plantation zones. Andrew
Jackson's military campaigns in Creek territory and in Florida in the late
1810s effectively neutralized the threat of those Indians and free blacks who
had troubled planters by harboring fugitive slaves and presenting the British
with a potential alliance. Jackson's attempt to assert American control over
these areas set the stage for his more controversial Indian removal policies of
the 1830s, whose total cost of $68 million was more than twice the amount
the federal government paid for the Louisiana territories and the Mexican
Cession combined. The first stage of this process further insulated the United
States from the influence of free people of color, a matter that had become a
federal responsibility in 1803, when Congress passed legislation that enforced
state restrictions against the entry of free blacks from the Caribbean.[14]

In a string of territorial accomplishments, the "Virginia dynasty" thus
simultaneously strengthened the plantation order and protected all white
Americans from potential enemies. In some respects, the Jeffersonians'
emphasis on collective security was quite similar to that of earlier imperial
administrators who had monitored the growth of slavery primarily in terms
of better governance of distant territories.[15] The diverse consequences

[14] R.S. Cotterill, "Federal Indian Management in the South, 1789–1825," in *Mississippi Valley
Historical Review* 20 (December, 1933), 333–52. In "Separate Interests: The Washington
Administration and the Nation-State," *JAH* 79 (June 1992), Andrew R.L. Cayton contends that
the Washington administration's attention to the Northwest secured that region's greater alle-
giance to the nation-state, though the subsequent pursuit of Indian policy was just as vigorous in
the southwest, as is evident in Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era*
(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975) (who gives the figure for expenditures at 97),
Robert Remini, *The Legacy of Andrew Jackson: Essays on Democracy, Indian Removal and
Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), and Kenneth Wiggins Porter's
various essays on the Seminole Wars in *The Negro on the American Frontier* (New York: Arno
Press, 1971). For the restriction of free black immigrants, see Jordan, *White over Black*, 383.

[15] David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1966), 125–64; Warren R. Hofstra, "'The Extension of His Majesties
Dominion's': The Virginia Backcountry and the Reconfiguration of Imperial Frontiers"
JAH 84 (March 1998), 1281–312; Christopher Brown, "Empire Without Slaves: British
Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution," *WMQ* 56 (April 1999),
273–306.